Of "Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands"

By DOROTHY SCARBOROUGH.

ARTHUR SYMONS'S new book, *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, is one of the most captivating examples of the literature of place. It could have been written only by a combination of poet, philosopher and artist, a mortal with a wandering foot and a seeing eye as well as an analytic mind. The reader gets here a wealth of colorful description of scenes and of the life going on in them, with the reflections of a man who has read and dreamed and lived widely and appreciatively. The mind is stretched by the perusal of Arthur Symons's work, and the memory filled with haunting pictures of delight, painted with an easeful yet unforgettable art.

Mr. Symons makes a study of the personalities, the souls of cities. He sees more than streets and houses and people. He glimpses the past in the present, the invisible in the visible, the magical in the material. He not only describes, but he interprets as well, the cities and islands and sea-coasts that have intrigued him.

The City of Pleasure.

For instance, he says of Seville:

"Seville, more than any city I have ever seen, is the city of pleasure. It is not languid with pleasure, like Venice, nor flushed with hurrying after pleasure, like Budapest; but it has the constant brightness, blitheness and animation of a city in which pleasure is the chief end of existence, and an end easily attained, by simple means within one's reach. It has sunshine, flowers, an expressive river, orange groves, palm trees, broad walks leading straight to the country, beautiful, ancient buildings in its midst, shining white houses, patios and flat roofs and vast windows, everything that calls one into the open and brings light and air to one, and thus gives men the main part of their chances of natural felicity."

Mr. Symons lingers lovingly on the charms of London, the London which suggests the past rather than the ugly modernity of motors and evil haste.

"There is in the aspect of London a certain magnificence: the magnificence of solidarity, energy, imperturbability and an unconquered continuance. It is alive from border to border; not an inch of it is not alive. It exists, goes on and has been going on for centuries. It sums up and includes England. Materially, England is contained in it, and the soul of England has always inhabited it like a body. We have not had a great man who has never lived in London.

Thames Magic.

"English air, working upon London smoke, creates the real London. . . . The especial beauty of London is the Thames, and the Thames is so wonderful because the mist is always changing its shapes and colors, always making its light mysterious, and building palaces of cloud out of mere Parliament houses with their jags and turrets. When the mist collaborates with night and rain the masterpiece is created."

He tries to analyze the elements of magic in the atmosphere of Dieppe, but declares it inexplicable.

"I went to Dieppe this summer with the intention of staying from Saturday to Monday. Two months afterward I began to wonder with a very mild kind of surprise why I had not yet returned to London. And I was not the only one to fall under this inexplicable fascination. There is a fantastical quality in Dieppe air which somehow turns us all, at our moments, into amiable and enthusiastic lunatics. . . . What is it, in this little French watering place, that appeals so to the not quite conventional Englishman, brings him to it, holds him in it, brings him back to it so impalpably? Nothing and everything. . . . I do not quite know why, but one cannot take things seriously at Dieppe. Only just on the other side of that blue streak is England: England means London. At the other end of a short railway journey is Paris. But all that is merely so many words; the mind refuses to grasp it as a fact. One's duties, probably, call one to London or Paris, one's realizable pleasures; everything but the moment's vague, immense, I say again, inexplicable satisfaction, which broods and dawdles about Dieppe."

Aftermath of Montserrat.

The reader finds each city or each scene that Mr. Symons describes the most enchanting place of all and longs to go there immediately. One has perhaps known nothing of Montserrat, for instance. He feels an immediate grievance against fate that he has not been there when he reads what Mr. Symons says:

"Like one not yet awakened from a dream, I seemed to myself while I was still in Montserrat; and now, having left it, I seem to have awakened from the dream. One of those few, exquisite, impossible places which exist, properly only in our recollection of them. Montserrat is still that place of refuge which our dreams are; and is it not itself a dream of the Middle Ages, Monsalvat, the castle of the Holy Grail, which men believed to be not in the world, and to contain something not of the world, poised so near heaven, among so many nearly inaccessible rocks, in the lonely hollow of a great plain? . . . With all its vastness, abruptness and fantastic energy, Montserrat is never savage; it is always forming naturally into beautiful, unexpected shapes, miracles of form, but a sort of natural genius in it for formal expression. And this form is never violent; it is always subtly rounded, even when it is bare gray rocks; and often breaks out deliciously into verdure, which is the ornament on form."

People as Poets.

One of the book's chief charms is the discursive reflection that the author expresses in talking of many things. For instance, he has been discussing the Spanish mystics and turning over a facsimile of an old manuscript.

"'Here in Spain there are many poets,' said a Capuchin monk to me as, on Christmas Day, we stood together in the convent library, looking out through the barred windows at the sunset which flamed over Seville. 'The people are the poets. They love beautiful things; they are moved by them; that word which you will hear constantly on their lips: *Mira!* [Look!] is itself significant. They would say it now if they were here, looking at the sunset, and they would point out to one another the colors, the shape of the tower silhouetted against the sky; they would be full of excited delight. Is there not something in that of the poetic attitude? They have the feeling; sometimes they put it into words, and make those rhymes, of which the greater part are lost, but some are at last written down, and you can read them in books.'"

Something Inconquerable.

Symons compares the lack of ease and dignity of human beings with the repose and the dignity of animals, even beasts enduring the humiliation of caged captivity.

"But observe, under all these conditions, the dignity of the beasts, their disdain, their indifference! . . . They have found an enemy craftier than they, they have been conquered and carried away captive, and they are full of smouldering rage. But with the loss of liberty they have lost nothing of themselves; the soul of their flesh is uncontaminated by humiliation. They pass a mournful existence nobly, each after his kind, in loneliness or in unwilling companionship; their eyes look past us without seeing us; we have no power over their concentration within the muscles of those vivid limbs or within the coils of their subtle bodies."

Mr. Symons in this volume makes analyses of many things, such as art, poetry, music and women, so that a varied and never monotonous pleasure lies in the pages.

The style is a pure delight for those who read with the ear as well as with the eye, for those who care for melodic words, the rhythmic swing of phrases, for prose that has much of the witchery of poetry. *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* must have been a delightful book to write, and is a joy to read.

CITIES AND SEA COASTS AND ISLANDS. By Arthur Symons. Brentano's, $3.